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ABSTRACT

Emphasizing the influence of television on children, this pamphlet explores some of the major criticisms of television and discusses ways parents can help their children get the most out of television. It is argued that the major problem with television is the amount of time that it steals from our lives, time that could be spent in developing intellectual and social skills. Viewing television may also negatively affect school performance by discouraging the development of interpretive skills, problem-solving strategies, the use of the imagination, long attention span, and the desire to read print. Television may also affect personality development by presenting models who reinforce ethnic and sex stereotypes, are prone to use violence, and are rewarded for foolish behavior or the manipulation and deception of others. The materialism promoted by quiz and game shows and commercials may distort social values as well as deceive young children who cannot perceive the true worth of products. Children have to learn to tell fact from fiction; they may find this particularly difficult when viewing docudramas. Guidelines are suggested to help parents who wish their children to avoid these hazards. These include limiting viewing time, discussing and monitoring programs, providing alternative activities, and contacting sponsors and networks to voice opinions about particular programs. (CB)

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Television VS. Your Child's Mind

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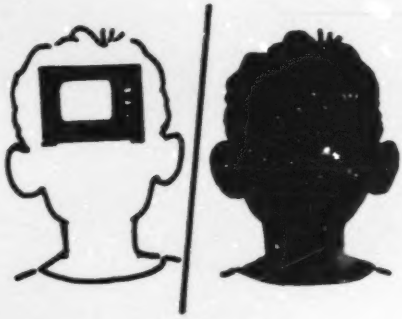

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Television: a controversial subject in today's society. Why is television so frequently under attack? And why has it continued to remain one of America's favorite pastimes despite the critics?

This pamphlet will explore some of the major criticisms of television, most of which are centered around television's strong influence on our children.

Television is a powerful force to be reckoned with in America today. To deny this would be to miss the entire thrust of the arguments against television. Ninety-seven percent of American homes have at least one television and numerous other homes have auxilliary sets in bedrooms, kitchens and basements. It seems that television has come to be an integral part of life in our country and it is this fact that is responsible for a large part of its infamy. It is not the television set, per se, that is the major culprit, nor even the programming, which ranges from insipid to outrageous. The major

culprit is the amount of time that television viewing steals from our lives.

It has been estimated that by the time a teenager graduates from high school, he will have watched 15,000 hours of television. That's approximately 3,000 hours more than he will have spent in school! Even if we choose to ignore the quality of the material viewed, the amount of time spent being passively entertained is staggering. Is it any wonder that some children emerge from high school still illiterate, that achievement test scores continue to decline, or that a growing number of students lack the basic skills necessary to function effectively in our society?

What did children do with all their time prior to the invention and popularization of television? This is the crux of the matter: from where are those precious 15,000 hours being stolen?

It used to be that a child spent his free time developing his intellect, creativity, motor skills, self-concept, personality, and relationships with others. Of course, a child did not sit down and say, "This afternoon I will develop my intellect," but this was the result all the same. Such pastimes as reading, doing crossword puzzles,

completing school assignments, and keeping a diary may leap to mind as some of the more obvious activities which can foster a child's intellectual growth, but in addition there are many more. Exploring the environment is essential to concept formation and in the past many hours were spent doing just that. Exploring the sandbox, playing in water, building "things", counting and sorting objects, experimenting with different types of art materials, all lead to a child's greater awareness of the world around him and contribute to his intellectual development.

A child's creativity is also enhanced, as he arranges and rearranges the elements of his environment. With each pile of sand that he heaps and every stroke he fingerpaints, he learns that he can create and this knowledge is generally a satisfying one that leads to further creativity. He learns that his actions do change the world around him and he is eager to ascertain the extent of his ability.

With each successful experience a child has, his self-concept grows stronger. This is true, not only of creative endeavors, but of more physical ones as well. Being able to catch, run, ride a bike, or jump adequately leads to a healthy body and a healthy psyche. Through positive incidents a child comes

to accept himself as a person that can do. In this way he establishes his worth as an individual in his own mind.

Compare all this to what can be gained by a child sitting passively in front of a television set. It does not matter what he does. His actions have no consequence. The incessant parade of sights and sounds do not require anything except that he touch the "on" button. There is no building upon skills, no successful enterprizes, no awareness of self. All he must do to be entertained is to sit and watch ...sit and vatch.

Interpersonal relationships is another area from which television detracts. It is difficult to imagine a conversation in which a small child does not increase his vocabulary, develop his facility with the English language, or gain a little bit more understanding of either the topic or the person to whom he is speaking. In some households, conversation is limited to directives and the bare essentials of communication. Dinner time, which can be an ideal time for the family to share with each other a little of themselves, is in many cases dominated by the television. Even if the program is something educationally beneficial, like the evening news, this time is still being subtracted from a block of time that could be used

to foster family cohesion. Satisfying relationships take time and effort to develop. People cannot watch television and interact at the same time. It has been estimated that the average pre-school child watches twenty hours of television per week. At this rate, a child will probably spend more time relating to cartoon characters and Captain Kangaroo than to his own family members.

After considering all the worthwhile aspects of life that a child is missing while watching television, it may appear that television is not an addition to our lives but a disadvantage. Realizing this, a person may not be so quick to pity the poor three percent of American children who are so unlucky as to lack a television. Pity the truly disadvantaged child: the average child or America who is deprived daily of the many experiences that would help him develop his own natural resources.

Why is it that children are allowed to spend so much time in front of the television? How can parents allow this to happen? In defense of most parents, it must be said that they just do not realize the detrimental effect that hour after hour of television viewing can have. But on the other hand, its benefits are far too apparent.

The television set is a built-in babysitter. As long as a child has the television to entertain him, there is a good chance that his parents are free to do household chores, pursue hobbies, read, or just plain relax for the duration of the program. A parent need not worry about amusing his child, or breaking up quarrels with playmates, or constantly telling him "don't touch that!" A television show that is even mildly interesting to a child will entertain him; an especially good show will hold him captive.

Peer pressure is another factor that contributes to a parent allowing an excessive amount of television viewing. If all the kids on the block watch television the entire Saturday morning, there really may not be any playmates for the child. Almost certainly a child who is "deprived" of watching Saturday morning shows in this situation will badger his parents with the age old argument - "But everyone else does it!"

THE EFFECT OF TELEVISION ON SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

It has been said that the general decline in school performance correlates to the popularization of television. There are several reasons why a person may come to this conclusion.

The primary reason for this idea is the passive nature of the act of watching television. Sitting and receiving information indiscriminately can become a habit. A child may go to school and sit down expecting that he will be able to absorb the teacher's lessons as easily as he absorbs the plot of "Happy Days". However, there is a big difference between being entertained and learning.

Learning is essentially an active process, not a passive one. If a child sits quietly and listens to every word a teacher says, he will not necessarily learn. He needs to assimilate what the teacher is saying into his own cognitive structure. He needs to think about this new information and check it against what he already knows. He needs to be able to apply the information to new situations. These processes are not easy - they require cooperation from the student. It is essential that the student engage in active participation.

An example of passive learning may help clarify why it is not desirable. Many teachers find that while their students can adequately perform the basic math operations, word problems present great difficulties. If the child is confronted with a page of math problems already set up with the +'s and -'s, he may do fine. However, if the child has to 1) think about the problem, 2) decide what operation is

is involved 3) decide what information is relevant, 4) and then do the computation necessary, the child's performance in a great number of cases is less than desirable. Since many standardized tests require that a student do word problems, the inability to handle them will lower his score. This may account for the trend of declining achievement scores that is so well-publicized.

Even if the importance of standardized tests is ignored, the basic goal of education cannot be. Since one of the aims of education is to provide skills which will be useful throughout the child's life, the importance of being able to solve problems is obvious. A person will very rarely encounter pages of neatly arranged multiplication and division problems once his formal education is completed. What he does encounter are problems for which a solution is needed - how much money is left after the bills are paid, how to alter a recipe for four people to feed ten people, how to figure miles per gallon, etc. These, and most other day to day encounters with math, are problems which require an active understanding of math and an active role in solving them.

The effect of passivity on a child's education is seen in reading as well as math. A good reading test evaluates a number of skills. While

most children are able to select the main idea of a passage, remember details, and recite the sequence of events, they tend to fall down on skills such as drawing conclusions, making inferences, interpreting facts, and predicting outcomes.

All of these interpretive and critical type skills are of great importance in becoming a good reader. Watching television does nothing for fostering this type of behavior. The plots move quickly and do not allow too much time for reflection. Commercials constantly interrupt the train of thought, providing an attractive alternative to thinking about the story. Thinking is hard work and it is infinitely easier to sit and stare. This habit is carried to school with many children.

Reflection and critical thinking are difficult while watching television because once the images have been flashed, the action cannot be stopped or even slowed down. Reading, on the other hand, does allow for this. A reader must pause to digest a newly revealed character trait, or go back to reread a position not quite understood. Thinking and comprehending is vital to reading. To go on without understanding is difficult, if not futile.

The imagination is another area from which television detracts. Reading a book demands that mental images be

formed. Scenes must be conjured up from the mind, rather than having them imposed. Two people may read the same story, but have different images in their minds, and interpret the characters differently. Therefore, the story has a personal aspect to it. What mental image appears when an author describes the character as "tall, dark, and very near to handsome" depends on a person's own version of "handsome" and the various ways one can approach that state. Television allows for no such freedom. Hundreds of people watch the same show and see exactly the same thing. There it is, in living color. The producer's version must be accepted because there is no alternative.

The development of a child's imagination and preductive skills is important, not only to progress in school, but in life as well. Imagination and predictive skills need to be nurtured and utilized often if they are to be available when a child needs them. Carried to the extreme, one can envision a child with so little imagination that he cannot imagine himself in any situation other than what he has seen on television.

Another factor that is very important in determining a child's success in school is his attention span. Television shows move rapidly and do not usually require any kind of mental

effort to follow the plot. Images flash by and the viewer is swept along. This is true, even with such educational shows as "Sesame Street" and "The Electric Company". Each segment is carefully designed to be appealing, colorful, and short. Producers of such shows take care to insure that the topic changes before boredom or even mild dissatisfaction comes over the viewer. Some experts say that children become used to this rapid, high-intensity style and expect the same vitality to be evident in school instruction.

Ideally, this would be nice. However, it is impractical to expect a teacher to single-handedly compete with a million dollar budget, a full crew of technical advisors, and years of marketing research. One person in charge of 20 - 30 children cannot hope to match such opponents.

This is not to say that children who watch such shows learn nothing. They do learn, but there is an important transition that needs to be made from television-land to reality. A child must learn how to concentrate harder, attend longer, and to fill in the blanks with imaginative thought.

There is one other area that needs mentioning when the effects of television on your child's school performance are being discussed, and that is the fact that there appears to be a decreased

necessity for reading because of television. It is no longer necessary to read the evening paper to find out the events of the day because of the local and national news programs. There are also specials on various topics of current interest that eliminate the need for personal research into a subject. There is even competition against pleasure reading because of the appearance of novels on television, even children's novels such as the Nancy Drew and The Hardy Boys series. It takes a great deal of willpower for a child to decide to read the book rather than watch it on television. Every time your child watches a program as opposed to reading the story, he misses an opportunity to practice his reading skills. Reading is just like any other skill in this respect: to become proficient, one must practice. Television novels do little to encourage this.

Hopefully, after reading this section, you have decided that the amount of television that your child watches must be limited. The next logical step is deciding which programs they will be allowed to watch. This leads us to the next section about the content of television programs and its possible effects on your child's personality.

HOW TELEVISION'S CONTENT EFFECTS YOUR CHILD'S PERSONALITY

Modeling is thought to be one of the important ways that a child acquires his personality. He observes the people around him and behaves accordingly. This can be seen as early as infancy, when a child smiles in response to smiles from his parents. This phenomenon continues to manifest itself as the child grows older. He may appear to have "his mother's temper", or "his father's patience" or "bad habits from his brother", etc. Although there are other factors involved in the development of personality, a child does acquire various personality traits from those around him. It is no rare occurrence when a child mimics the actions of the people he respects.

For generations, parents have realized this and have sought to protect their children from "bad influences". There are times when a parent may discourage his child from associating with a certain playmate because of the possibility of his child being led astray. Under the same theory, there are many teachers who have been forced to leave their professions by members of the community because of personal conduct that did not conform to the community's

morals. So certainly there is a large contingency of adults who do believe in the modeling theory, even if they do not call it by that name.

Storytelling, which may appear to be only a form of entertainment, really has an important function in society. Storytelling is a subtle way that children acquire models and learn lessons about life. It is not necessary for the story teller to point out the lesson to be learned or to tell the child that he should try to behave like the hero. When a story is well-written, the message is just absorbed without any prompting. The stories teach by themselves. Stories such as "The Three Pigs" and "Cinderella" have morals and are supposed to gently deliver a message. The universal, timeless themes of good vs. evil, honesty, hard work and the wages of sin, are found throughout children's stories.

Keeping these two factors in mind - the modeling process and the function of stories, let's examine some of the characters on television.

Some of the characters on television are extremely prone to violent behavior. A parent who watches a program that glorifies violence or allows his child to do so, is tacitly implying that the kind of behavior shown is to be respected. Why else would millions of

people be transfixed by these types of characters. Characters such as Baretta, Kojak, Starsky and Hutch, and the Six Million Dollar Man, while working for law and order, do so in an extremely violent manner. Because of their popularity, a child may attempt to model himself after such figures.

A study conducted by the American Medical Association has found that at the age of fifteen, a child may have seen 13,400 persons destroyed on television. Besides teaching a child that violence is a viable way to cope with life, this much death and destruction inures children to violence. The spectacular becomes the commonplace, the horrors become facts of life.

Although acts of violence and decadence do occur in our society, television blows them out of proportion. On an ordinary day, how many acts of violence does the average person see? On an ordinary day, how many acts of violence are portrayed on television? What these shows do by magnifying the amount of violence and meanness in our society is distort a child's perception of reality. After watching television for a few weeks, a stranger to our country or a naive child might reasonably assume that the major causes of death and injury in America are acts of violence, while in fact the greatest

causes are highway and industrial accidents. It does not seem possible to get a realistic view of life by watching television.

People who are strongly against this excessive showing of violence and destruction have banded together to form the National Correspondence Group. The aim of this group is to make the average viewer more aware of the extent of violence on television and to then organize to exert pressure on the networks and sponsors to draw it to a halt.

This group has worked out a system for evaluating shows according to their violance. Points are given for each act of violence or destruction, ranging from two points for a push or a shove to fifty points for a bloody homicide. In January 1976, this group awarded the top dishonor to a television movie that, among other offenses, had three shootings, nine armed assaults, two break-ins, one strangling, four death threats, five fist fights, one display of a corpse and the destruction of a building. This show racked up a total of 975 points!

This group takes the stand that television viewers can do something about the low quality material shown on television. They advocate boycotting

the sponsors of such shows and have published "The Target List" which contains the names and addresses of the sponsors of objectionable shows.

Some people may counter the arguments against television violence by noting that violence is present in some books as well, and there are not very many people who would advocate the elimination of reading from a child's life. However, while it is true that some books are just as violent as certain shows, it is infinitely easier to monitor the books that your child reads. This is especially so with regards to young children. You may help your child select books, suggest books for him to read, and discuss them with him. In addition, it may be more difficult for him to obtain books that are extremely objectionable simply because schools and libraries do not generally stock these types of books. He is given a wide range of acceptable alternatives from which to choose. This is not the case with television. The full gamut of shows, even the worst, are easily accesible.

Certain studies have shown that the great amount of violence on television affects boys and girls differently. This may be true because of the modeling process. Since most of the aggressive characters on television are male, boys appear to have a tendency to

be affected by developing more aggressive personalities. Since most of the victims on such programs are female, it is theorized that girls will be affected by developing more fearful, mistrusting personalities. If the current popularity of shows with female protagonists, such as "Policewoman", "Wonderwoman", and "Charlie's Angels" continues, the second part of this theory may have to be revised.

Violence and destruction aside, there are still other undesirable models appearing on television. Situation comedies are notorious for the inane, bungling characters that serve as their protagonists. The predicaments that characters such as Laverne and Shirley, Rhoda, Bob Newhart, and Barney Miller get themselves into are ridiculous. They are often thrust into situations that ordinary people manage to avoid or resolve easily by using common sense and acting in a mature manner. Instead, these characters often seem to complicate matters further by their ineptitude and lack of judgment. Immaturity and irresponsibility are rewarded because everyone laughs at the whole episode, forgives the characters for behaving in such an unconventional manner, and loves them once more. Again, by watching such shows, your children may get the impression that these qualities are desirable.

In addition to characters who behave in a scatterbrained manner, these situation comedies often glorify the deception of other people. Quite frequently the plots include such dilemmas as attempts to hide a misdeed, such as attending an unchaperoned party from a parent, or avoiding telling a husband that a fender was smashed, or that too much money was spent, or convincing a teacher than an absence was genuinely motivated. Such themes emphasize the deception and manipulation of other people. When confronted with these kinds of models day after day, children may begin to view such behavior as accepted and/or desirable. Instead of striving for honest, straightforward, mature relationships with others, they may opt for ones in which they can gain the upper hand through manipulation and deception. It works on television, doesn't it? The characters are consistently rewarded for their cuteness (read: manipulation) and cleverness (read: deception). Children can not benefit from models such as these. The effects that such models may have on your child's personality are usually not desirable.

Another negative aspect of television's character portrayal is its reinforcement of certain stereotypes. Characters such as the bigot Archie Bunker, the dumb blond on Three's Company, the Jewish mother on Rhoda,

the ultra-feminist Maude, the macho-man Kojak, and the flighty housewife Edith Bunker, represent a small sampling of the stereotypes shown on television. In reality, the vast majority of people possess a personality that blends a large number of traits, many of them quite different and unique, and sometimes even contradictory to a certain extent. The special combination of these traits gives us real life people who project depth and complexity, rather than the superficial package-deal personalities of the characters so often represented on the television screen.

TELEVISION'S EMPHASIS ON MATERIALISM

There are other objectionable aspects of television programming, besides violence, destruction, silly characters, stereotyped behavior, and the emphasis on manipulation and deception. One of these is the materialism fostered by the quiz and game shows and commercials.

Quiz and game shows generally offer expensive gifts, lavish trips, and cash prizes to the people who win. Implicit in these awards is the stress on money and material goods in our society. Although this system may be reflective of our society, there is the possibility that at least some of it may be causative. A vicious circle

situation comes to mind: these shows award these types of prizes because the people in our society value and expect them; they value these material goods because they are seen as prizes, not only on the quiz and game shows, but in life as well.

There are other ideals and goals in a person's life that are just as important as material goods, if not more so. They also require sacrifice, time and effort: honesty, family, friendship, self-awareness, fidelity, patience, kindness, to name a few. Yes, materialism is an integral part of our society, but we must consider what the effects on our children are when this one aspect of our lives is emphasized so heavily. There is the danger that materialism will creep into first place, attaining higher priority than traits such as honesty, kindness, etc. One can foresee that when materialistic items are valued so highly as to become the dominant guiding factors in our lives, the other goals may be neglected, and in fact may at times even be in direct conflict with the acquisition of cash and property. It is necessary to stress to children the relative value of life goals and help them put these shows in perspective.

Commercials also contribute to this glorification of material goods. The viewer is continually subjected to

periodic interruptions of the program being aired. The message that is conveyed during these breaks is "buy, buy, buy."

The advertising specialists go to great extents to make the viewer feel that he absolutely must have that particular product. They do so by playing on insecurities, the desire to be part of the crowd, and the dreams for the good life and status.

For example, most of the personal grooming products, such as mouthwash, deodorant, shampoo, perfume, etc., stress how much more attractive or likeable a person will be after using these products. If the viewer evaluates the situation rationally, he will probably agree that using a certain brand of after-shave or toothpaste is not really going to have a big effect on the quality of one's interpersonal relationships. However, the message is subtle and designed to linger in the memory. How many of us, pausing to decide which brand of soap to buy, are nudged by the remnants of the commercial that are still in our subconscious? What is regrettable is that these images are generally not based on objective information, but on the idea of a man and woman walking hand in hand into the sunset, or a beautiful woman talking to a professional ball player, or a woman being accepted by

her car pool. We are not buying the product, but the images of ourselves to which we aspire.

Likewise, the advertising specialists for other type products, such as beverages, fast foods, and snacks, emphasize the fun a person has while consuming these products. Scenarios of parties, picnics, people laughing and loving one another abound. Again, the message is implicit that if a person buys the wrong brand, it will be difficult to enjoy oneself.

These types of messages are at best false and at the worst instigating of a hierarchy of values that run counter to decent human relationships. Maybe attractive women would love to date the owner of a flashy car; maybe children would love their mothers more if they would buy a certain breakfast food; or maybe men will whistle at a woman if she wears a certain kind of pantyhose. But before being taken in by these mental images, one should stop and think if these are desirable goals. Does a man really want to date a woman who likes him for his motor vehicle? Should children love a mother because of the food with which she stocks the kitchen? Does a woman want strange men drawing attention to her figure on the street?

These values are probably questionable to a large segment of our population when considered from this point of view. The problem is that most people do not sit down and evaluate what they see on the television screen. What is even a greater problem is the fact that children are subjected to these messages, both overtly and subliminally, and in all probability, they are not capable of examining the advertisements from this angle.

At least adults know that the reason these products are advertised is to increase business and raise profits. Children do not realize this. They may believe all the claims for toys, cereals, and junk food. They have not had an opportunity to learn that the toys advertised may not be as much fun as projected on television, may break soon after purchase, or may be grossly overpriced. Since they may have only a vague concept of business, it would be logical for them to assume that these claims are true. Children are not used to being lied to, or filtering implications and half-truths from reality.

Being an intelligent consumer is necessary, if a person wants to get the most value from a dollar. Unfortunately, today's commercials do little, if nothing, to develop this type of awareness in the viewer. The

durability of toys, the comparative prices of foods, the relative sizes of packages, or the measurable quality of an item are not usually mentioned. Instead, the viewer sees smiling faces, contented families, proud parents and satisfied friends. Again, the images haunt us rather than teach us.

This lack of objective information is particularly true of the sponsors of children's television shows. After listening to a commercial for heavily-sugared, preservative-filled, and additive-hyped cereals, a naive viewer may assume that this particular cereal is ideal. Children in particular may be swayed into believing this cereal or junk food to be exactly what they want or need. In reality, it may be very low in nutritional value, much more expensive than some of the more traditional cereals, or bad for the teeth and the maintenance of normal body weight.

In addition to this irresponsible portrayal of junk foods and cereals, the sponsors of children's shows are also guilty of encouraging the type of materialism which has been previously mentioned in connection with the game shows. Commercials for a wide variety of trucks, dolls, games and bicycles abound on television shows. A study that has been conducted by ACT (Action for Children's Television) reveals that

these types of advertisements comprise over 50% of all commercials on children's shows during the month preceeding Christmas and Hanukkah. With this kind of pressure, it is difficult indeed for a child to experience the true spirit of the season. It is little wonder that these holidays have become so materialistically oriented when the advertising specialists begin to prey upon members of our society at such an early age.

FACT VS. FICTION ON TELEVISION

Most television shows are meant to be forms of entertainment and enjoyment. They are designed to provide pleasant diversions for the viewer during his leisure time. Exceptions to this would be the daily news shows and the special news programs such as "Sixty Minutes", which examine specific topics of current interest. These shows are meant to inform rather than entertain.

In between the two worlds of entertainment and information are the documentary dramas. These are shows which are either based on real events or revolve around real people, but do not adhere strictly to the facts. The reality is embellished, twisted, glorified and/or exaggerated in an attempt to render the truth more interesting. This format for stories has been

given various names, including docudrama, fictional truth, faction, non-fiction novel, and melodrame a clef. Examples of such works are "Washington: Behind Closed Doors", "Roots", "Victory at Entebbe", "Truman at Potsdam" and "The Bermuda Triangle".

Although on the surface these shows seem to be enlightening, they may actually give the viewer false information or a false impression. Coversations are imagined, with words being put into the mouths of real people. There is no way to ascertain that these episodes actually happened and, in fact, the authors will many times admit that they are fictional. They see nothing wrong with this, since the show is not being produced by the news department, but by the entertainment division. The burden of sorting out the fact from the fiction rests entirely with the viewer. The major problem here is that the viewer is not aware of this. Since networks have been known to spend millions of dollars to produce verifiable news and accurate, unbiased news specials, the viewer may erroneously assume that this is the case with the so-called docudramas. Moreover, the people who are fictionalized do not have grounds for a libel case, because although the circumstances may point to a certain real live personality, the names are changed. There are few judges who would rule favorably in a case wherein someone lied about a person, but

changed the person's name so no one would be sure that's who was being portrayed.

Despite drawbacks such as this, the documentary drama does seen to have a great deal to offer the public. Historical events and eras are presented that the average person may only grasp vaguely. However, with some refined techniques this vehicle could be of more value, particularly to children. Perhaps consultants from the news department of the network could be utilized to make sure that the facts are adhered to as closely as possible. It would also be beneficial when representing a segment that is completely fictional or surmised to have the film frozen for an instant and an announcer say just that. Another alternative would be to have a rolling caption on the screen at the beginning of such episodes. In addition, a commentator could summarize the show at the end, highlighting the truth and pointing out the fictionalized or romanticized parts. Techniques such as these would do much to enable the domumentary drama to fill a need for more informative television programming. Surely it would be preferable for your child to gain some historical perspective rather than just be entertained with situation comedies and shows packed with crime, sex, and violence.

WHAT YOU CAN DO FOR YOUR CHILD

Despite all the criticisms being made about television, it seems that this media is here to stay. There are so many people who watch television regularly that it has become a part of our culture. However, it is not necessary to indulge in indiscriminate television viewing, nor to allow your child to do so. Here are some guidelines that may help you, and particularly your child, to get the most out of your television and to avoid some of the greatest hazards.

1. Limit television time.

It is suggested that you limit the amount of time that you allow your child to watch television. This will help your child avoid falling into the television habit. Television will not become an automatic response to the question, "What shall we do today?" Instead it will be a carefully planned schedule of programs that your child genuinely wants to see, not a time killer.

It is probably wiser to establish a weekly time limit rather than a daily one. In this way, your child will not be forced to choose between two

relatively good programs on one day, and settle for a less desirable one on a later day in the week. Seven or eight hours per week would seem like a reasonable time limit.

In addition to enabling your child to get the maximum benefit from the entire gamut of television shows, this weekly plan forces your child to learn how to use the television guide, read a schedule, and evaluate the programs that he watches. This last point is particularly important. Instead of randomly watching anything that is being aired at a certain moment, your child will have to compare the program to the others available and make a value judgment. This will help him develop the critical thinking skills so necessary for reading and other school related tasks. He will be active rather than passive, and evaluating rather than accepting.

2. Discuss programs.

You can help your child make these decisions by discussing the programs he chooses to watch. Discussing does not mean making the choice for your child, coercing him, or manipulating him into the "proper" choices. Discussing means having two way communication with him to help him clarify what he likes and why. Questions such as these may be helpful:

- Which character do you like best on that show? Why?

- Do you think things like that actually happen in real life? Can you think of some examples?

- What do you think you would do if you were in a situation such as that?

- Which part of the show did you like the best? Why?

- What do you think about the way that family lives? Do you think you'd be comfortable in a family like that?

- Do you think living in a big city is really that bad? Can you see any good points to living in a city?

- Do you think most doctors (lawyers, nurses, teachers, detectives) devote that much time to each client?

- Can you think of a better way for the story to end?

- If you had to write another episode for that show, what would you include?

- Why do you think that character acts that way (silly, dumb, violent, abusive, nasty, thoughtless, etc.)? Do you think it's possible for someone like that to change?

3. Exceptions.

There may be certain times when your child will be faced with a particularly difficult decision on which programs to watch. On occasion, when you approve of both of the choices, it may be possible to strike a compromise. Perhaps you can let him watch one extra hour of television, provided that he read for one hour in return. This is more effective with reluctant readers who otherwise would rarely pick up a book.

4. Monitoring programs.

It may still be necessary, especially in the case of younger children to veto certain programs. This monitoring would be done according to your own pet peeves. Violent shows may upset some parents more than sexually implicit scenes and vice versa, so this decision should be based on the family's value structure. This veto should be used as little as possible. Otherwise your child will feel as if he really has no choice at all in the matter.

Problems can be foreseen arising from peer pressure. Children have a natural desire to conform to the behavior of their friends. If their friends are allowed to watch an objectionable program, they may feel unjust discrimination at your veto. First,

it may be advisable to verify, through a phone call or visit, that their friends are, in fact, allowed to watch such a program. If so, it may be conceivable to persuade the other parents to join forces with you in this matter. If not, perhaps you might consider allowing your child to watch this program once a month instead of every week. This will make it possible for him to at least be aware of the characters and general story trend and be able to participate to some degree in conversation pertaining to it. At the same time, he will not become too familiar with the program.

5. Provide for alternate activities.

It may be a bit unrealistic to assume that if your child reduces the amount of time he watches television, he will automatically pursue worthwhile activities. Although it is not advisable to structure every hour for your child, it would be helpful to provide some alternative activities. Providing books, toys, games, musical instruments, etc. would ensure that he has something with which to occupy his time. Planning trips to the museum, library, zoo, and historical sites may widen his interests so it will not be necessary to rely on television for entertainment. Spending time with your child just doing routine things would also be beneficial.

6. Contact sponsors and networks.

Television programs are financed by the revenues generated by selling commercial time to sponsors. One way of obtaining better quality programs is to inform businesses that you will not buy their products if they continue to sponsor objectionable shows. Companies that lose business because of shows they sponsor, will probably cease to do so. Other companies will probably be reluctant to become associated with such a program and therefore the show may have to be taken off the air. Money seems to be a powerful bargaining point in this society and it is possible to use your money, or the withholding of it, to convey your viewpoint.

Another alternative, along these lines, would be to contact the networks and voice your opinions. The average person may feel that this is a futile task, but if enough average people do such things it is possible that the networks may yield to the pressure. Perhaps you may have the time and energy to devote to a petition. If so, this route may even be more effective.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christine Ciensczyk Smith received her B.A. in Psychology from Douglass College and her M.Ed. in Reading from the University of Arizona. She is the co-author of an educational unit in recognizing literary technique, What Makes A Good Story?, and the author of several plays for children.

Ms. Smith, who has had many years experience teaching, is currently a reading specialist for Washington Township Public Schools in southern New Jersey. Her pamphlet, How To Help Your Child Succeed in School, is available from Pamphlet Publications.